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A history of trapping in Washington



fish & wildlife

FACTSHEET

In 1805 when the Lewis and Clark expedition reached the Pacific Coast, the Northwest fur trade was in its infancy. Alexander Mackenzie, a representative of the North West Company, had reached the Pacific Coast and established a trading post 10 years before the arrival of Lewis and Clark. The principal trade of this first trading enterprise was raw furs. Posts established for fur trading were later located at several places along the Columbia, the Okanogan, and the Spokane Rivers.

The Hudson's Bay Company was also establishing posts in the Northwest which produced a competitive market for raw furs. Prior to the trading posts, and a ready market, pelts of wild animals were used by the native Indians as clothing and trade items between tribes. Certain furs held religious significance for some tribes.

When the Northwest Company was merged with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821, the fur trade of British America became a monopoly of great proportions; a single operation encompassing numerous trading posts and thousands of men in millions of square miles from the Atlantic to the Pacific and north to the Arctic shores.

Pride, greed, and selfishness motivated the exploitation of the fur resources.

In anticipation of losing much of the southern part of this vast region, the British company encouraged a maximum harvest of wild furs to destroy the fur resources, creating a buffer zone to shield the British operation. The beaver particularly were victimized. This valuable furbearer was eliminated in many watersheds.

Independent trappers and traders competed with the large, well organized companies. Mountain men, as these hardy independents were known, were effective even without the financial backing of the larger organizations. Their activities were centered around their trapping and hunting rather than getting the Indians to harvest the fur for them. Mountain men gave little attention to the conservation of the furbearers and other wildlife.

By 1850 the harvest of furbearers, primarily beaver, had begun to decline. Silk hats were beginning to replace the traditional beaver felt hat and the discovery of gold in California drew many of the adventuresome trappers away to the gold fields.

The homesteaders that followed in the footsteps of the trappers continued to trap and pursue the remaining wildlife to support themselves and their families. Trapping in many cases was carried on almost year-round. There was always some value in each pelt. To survive, homesteaders exploited all resources.

In 1909, twenty years after statehood was achieved, the state legislature passed the first laws that provided protection for beaver. Strictly enforced closures saw beaver again flourish in many areas of Washington.

By 1963, beaver were once again numerous in all of the state providing justification for reopening the trapping season for beaver.

Until recently beaver have always been the number one furbearer in Washington. When beaver were not available to the trapper his interest declined in all furbearers. With the upswing in the value of long-hair furbearers trapper interest has become more diversified. Coyote, bobcat, and raccoon which were of little value ten years ago are now worth more than the average beaver.

Washington trappers today are required to successfully complete a Trapper Training course that helps them understand trapper responsibility, proper trapping methods and wildlife principles.

POPULATION DYNAMICS

Population dynamics is sometimes difficult for people to understand. However, when all the facts are available and clearly understood the yearly rise and decline of animal populations within an ecosystem is understandable.

The basic necessities of life, including food, water, shelter and space, determine what species and population density can exist in an area.

To better understand the situation, a productive marsh in the Columbia Basin is an example area. Most of the ponds and marshes there were formed recently.

In 1952, water began to flow into the arid desert lands of central Washington through canals built by the Federal Government to carry impounded water from the Columbia River. As the water was drawn from the canals and spread over the farmlands for irrigation, the unused water seeped through the soil and in some areas formed ponds, marshes, and seeps. It was not long before the grasses and plants began to grow in and around the water to form ideal new habitat for water-associated life, including muskrat.

With necessities of life in abundance, the muskrat thrived and the basin is one of the finest producers of muskrat in the State.

Let's look more closely at one productive pair of muskrats that live in their established territory on our example marsh. The first litter of five young is born on April 15 and the female rat is in good physical condition. She feeds her offspring and they grow rapidly. Because there are no hardships and life is going so well, another litter of five young is born in August. Food is still abundant, but things are getting crowded. One young rat is taken by a hawk and two are taken by a mink that is feeding her young.

By mid-October the winter rat houses have been built and a third litter of rats is born. This time there are only three young and they are all dead within a week.

The territory is filled to capacity and winter will bring on a lessening food supply. Freezing temperatures and other killing factors will begin to take their toll. By spring, even though it may not be noticeable, there will be only enough available food to support the original two muskrats. If the rest of the marsh is occupied by other muskrat families and there is no room for expansion the nine muskrats in the example family will be reduced to two. This is the carrying capacity of the territory.

Trapping seasons are designed to reduce populations to a safe margin above carrying capacity. This allows extra animals in the population to take the place of those that will die through other causes. Those areas that are producing healthy litters need to be cropped. This is no different than the farmer who sends

his surplus animals to market each fall. If the muskrats are not cropped, overuse of the available food supply could lead to the destruction of the life supporting plants for several years.

In overcrowded populations there is always the danger of disease. This may wipe out entire populations.

All animal life, large and small, prey and predator, aquatic or terrestrial have the same basic requirements.

Wildlife management is concerned with assuring that land produces continuous annual crops of wild animals.

Trapping seasons harvest surplus animals without destroying broodstock populations.

Furbearing Animals

Muskrat
Mink
Beaver
River Otter
Marten
Bobcat
Canada Lynx
Raccoon
Badger
Mountain Fox
Weasels

Fur Harvest - 10 Year Averages

	1967-77	1957-67	1947-57
Beaver	10,099	4,216	**
Muskrat	36,667	38,603	39,344
Otter	704	704	449
Mink	1,614*	4,321	4,748
Raccoon	2,981	2,301	1,792
Bobcat	857	508	166
Skunk	510	607	213

* Harvest down because of lack of demand for wild mink.

**First open season on beaver 1963-64

Protected Wildlife

Grizzly Bear
Caribou
Sea Otter
Fur Seal
Fisher
Wolverine
Timber Wolf
Gray Squirrel
Douglas Squirrel
Red Squirrel
Flying Squirrel
Golden-Mantled Ground Squirrel
Chipmunk
Cony or Pika
Hoary Marmot
White-Tailed Jack Rabbit
Pigmy Rabbit
Fox Squirrel
Western Washington Turtles